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## **Autonomy, erasure and persistence in the urban gardening commons**

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### **Abstract**

Collective gardening spaces have existed across Lisbon, Portugal, for decades. This article attends to the makeshift natures made by black migrants from Portugal's former colonies, and the racial urban geography thrown into relief by the differing fortunes of white Portuguese community gardening spaces. Conceptualizing urban gardens as commons-in-the-making, we explore subaltern urbanism and the emergence of autonomous gardening commons on the one hand, and the state erasure, overwriting or construction of top-down commons on the other. While showing that urban gardening forges commons of varying persistence, we also demonstrate the ways through which the commons are always closely entwined with processes of enclosure. We further argue that urban gardening commons are divergent and cannot be judged against any abstract ideal of the commons. In conclusion, we suggest that urban gardening commons do not have a 'common' in common.

### **Keywords**

Urban agriculture; Urban political ecology; Community gardens; Postcolonial; Lisbon, Portugal; Commons

### **Introduction**

Considering the kind of politics needed to avoid “the coming barbarism”, Isabelle Stengers writes that the obsession with a stable distinction between “remedy and poison” is one that “empoisons, even destroys”. “How many efforts,” she asks, “have been destroyed because they couldn’t offer guarantees that no one should be capable of offering?” (2015:102–103). Community gardening has historically been freighted with just such utopian promise. Community gardening has been lauded as a means to: oppose the market logic of the industrial food system (Feenstra 2002; Wilson 2013); reach urban ecological reconciliation, enhance well-being, ecosystem service provision, biodiversity and social integration (Colding et al 2013); shape urban socio-ecological processes in collaborative, not-for-profit ways (Staeheli et al 2002; Shillington 2012;

Eizenberg 2012); allow anti-capitalist movements to cohere in practical form (Schmelzkopf 2002).

However, community garden's 'poisons' – the contradictions of collective struggles and over-hyped guarantees of socio-ecological justice – are now much better understood. Critical geographers have sounded a cautious tune, moving beyond simplistic celebrations of community gardening (McClintock 2014). They note how neoliberal strategies to create more competitive cities are often accompanied by new forms of governance, as municipalities offload responsibilities for managing the urban fabric on to corporate or para-state bodies – these can include community gardening initiatives (Perkins 2010). Where the urban green is deployed to provide amenity to residents, ensuing rises in land value or property prices can easily displace existing residents (Safransky 2014; Wolch et al 2014). Community gardens have been seen as the flanking agents of neoliberalism: by emphasising self-reliance, sub-state reciprocity and voluntarism, community gardening projects can produce neoliberal subjects (Pudup 2008). The terms of politics in community gardening are also constrained, as they are often about participation or coping rather than radical transformation (Ernwein 2017). Moreover, racial inequalities can be threaded through the practices of community gardening (Reynolds 2015; Ghose and Pettygrove 2014).

The consensus is that community gardens are neither straightforwardly a radical site of hope nor subservient to broader processes of neoliberalisation (Baron 2016; McClintock 2014; Tornaghi 2014).<sup>1</sup> Research, it seems, no longer aims to reconcile or overcome community gardening's contradictions, but rather to investigate their mixed socio-ecological histories and implications. Community gardening requires, in Stengers' (2015) terms, the art of the pharmakon. The pharmakon, depending on dose, can be remedy or poison. Since they enter the unruly milieu of the world, experiments in collective regimes of thinking and action are vulnerable to their own inconsistencies, and prey to "protagonists – the State, Capital, professionals" who will push processes likely to "empoison" them (2015:104). Collective experiments should be prudent,

Stengers argues, not stabilised ‘unthinkingly’ as a sure remedy, but used guardedly with attention paid to their constitutive poisons.

In this paper we develop a historical narrative about the collective endeavour of gardening in Lisbon, Portugal. Lisbon’s urban community gardens, or *hortas* (vegetable gardens), are usually located on land classified as ‘unregulated’ (which may be publicly or privately owned). On unregulated land, customary use is neither strictly legal nor illegal, but rather tacitly accepted. Such gardens are a longstanding feature and occupy about one per cent of the city’s 85km<sup>2</sup> area. Unlike many North American community gardens, which emerged periodically as responses to economic crises or austerity, Lisbon’s *hortas* have persisted through long-term racial and class histories associated with Portugal’s late urbanization and rapid decolonisation in the 1970s. The gardens we examine are what Yitfachel (2009) calls “gray spaces”: positioned between spaces of legality/approval/safety and spaces of eviction/destruction/death. Prevalent state strategies for dealing with such spaces are, Yitfachel (2009:92) outlines, either to “launder” them from above by sanitising, improving or developing them, or to “solve” them by the expulsion or erasure of undesirable elements. We here examine both strategies, pointing to the interplay between autonomous, bottom-up gardening spaces and those imposed top-down fashion by the state. In so doing we have two broad aims.

First, the paper responds to Darly and McClintock’s (2017) call to consider peripheral voices in European studies of urban agriculture, and in general to calls for moving urban political ecology beyond a white, Euro-American focus (Lawhon et al 2014; Heynen 2016).<sup>2</sup> Our story of Lisbon’s gardening spaces attends to the makeshift natures made by black migrants from Portugal’s former colonies, outlining how a form of racial supremacy may emerge from the creation and erasure of bottom-up urban natures. This racial geography is thrown into relief by the differing fortunes of white Portuguese community gardening spaces. Our story thus draws work on community gardening into conversation with what Roy (2011) calls subaltern urbanism. Subaltern

urbanism seeks to reclaim the figure of the poor urbanite as a subject of history, valorising their tactics and makeshift architectures, their informal life typified by “flexibility, pragmatism, negotiation well as constant struggle for survival and self-development” (Bayat 2007:579). Of course informality is not solely the preserve of the slum dweller – informality of a certain kind can be valorised by elites, even as subaltern informalities are criminalised. We are interested in how subaltern urbanisation has blended with ideals of liberal citizenship and modern ecological management in a complex working out of Portugal’s colonial legacy in the once-imperial centre, Lisbon.<sup>3</sup>

Our second aim in this paper is to put community gardening into conversation with the recent surge of work on the commons and practices of commoning. Political ecology has long been interested in how common property forms offer a counterpoint to enclosure by state or capital, and in how differences of interest or power play out in the commons (Turner 2016, 1; see Eizenberg’s seminal (2011) study of New York’s community gardens as commons; Lang 2014). Lately, focus has shifted from an emphasis on the commons as an institutionalised resource management regime to the practices of commoning as a “struggle for alternative futures” that refuse to treat life instrumentally (Kirwan et al. 2016:3). The concept of the commons offers a productive way to understand community gardening and urban agriculture for several reasons. First, commoning points to the improvisational, ongoing and persistent character of hopeful claims made by community gardening, rather than positing gardens as a ‘solution’ to systemic crises. This is particularly apparent in the differing uses of garden commons. For black migrants living in the city’s periphery, the community garden is more about subsistence, a form of compensation in the face of systemic inequalities, whereas state-led community gardens follow a script for middle class environmentalism: the commons can be formed through both the environmentalism of the poor and of the rich (Guha 2000; Martínez-Alier 2002). Second, since the commons and commoners are co-constituted, emerging from “indeterminate contamination” (Tsing 2015:34), they may augur against the individualism and

anthropocentrism of modernity. The commons are one way through subjectivities can emerge, sustain themselves, and become 'at stake' through their claims to space.

Third, when not conceptualised as an abstract model that can translate across time and space, the commons can help us understand the contested historic and geographic specificity of urban gardening. Urban gardens make shared natures in compromised spaces of the present, but they are commons-in-the-making which are not necessarily on a pathway prescribed by a uniform, underlying ideal of a commons.

### **Commons and Commoning**

The commons are usually counterposed to enclosure – the ongoing seizure, division, conversion and demolition of various aspects of public life and space into private gain by state, economic, techno-modernist power. The most influential strain of work on the commons traces back to Elinor Ostrum's documentation of common property resource management. Ostrum (1990) demonstrated that people could self-organise to manage natural resources sustainably, offering a strong counter to Hardin's tragedy of the commons. Ostrum's analysis inspired a wave of community-based resource management through the 1990s-2000s. This form of 'institutional commons' is concerned to find the most appropriate procedures, rules and institutions to govern access to, management of, and benefit from natural resources. While remaining popular in environmental governance, critical scholars have raised concerns about the way this kind of commons thinking retains liberal assumptions about rational individuals, means-ends benefits and the necessity for guiding institutions (Turner 2016).

A more expansive sense of the commons springs from the work of Hardt and Negri (2009). Rather than focus on the institutional governance of material resources, this way of thinking presents the commons as a generative realm of human potential and creativity, a political and ethical space that exceeds processes of individual or market enclosure. In a similar vein, Gibson-Graham's influential anti-capitalocentric approach to everyday economies emphasises that commons are not just historic remainders, but

actually existing, ongoing practices of inventing and reinventing relational processes to govern the distribution of benefit and care between people, land and nature. The wager is that commons assemble for inclusive, just and sustainable spaces – they are not predicated on money or exchange value, but on occupation, use, domicile. The urban has been a particular focus as a space for spectacular resistance against neoliberal enclosure (Harvey 2012). Dissident urbanites challenge the reduction of citizenship and sociality to the denominator of the power to consume (Chatteron 2016). Recent interventions on the radical or insurgent commons emphasise them as a kind of “prospecting” (Amin and Howell 2016), an unstable, future-oriented project, awaiting definition or resolution, in which communities of care, responsibility, access, benefit and so on are negotiated.

There is, of course, a need to look beyond the ‘romance’ of the commons (Kirwan et al 2016). Commons may well resist the privatisation of everyday life and resources, but are nonetheless still tied to broader processes of enclosure. In urban areas many commons are areas of low land value, while rural commons tend to exist where capitalisation pressures are low (Turner 2016). Their existence is thus predicated on a lack of enclosure as well as active processes of commoning. For example, anthropologist Anna Tsing’s (2015) exploration of the commons in matsutake mushroom forests in Japan, China, Finland and the US Northwest emphasises that a form of common livelihood is brought back to landscapes ruined by large-scale state forestry projects. This only happens, however, in a patchy manner. These commons arise in spaces left vacant as state-capital extraction moves elsewhere. Resurgence of the forest commons in Japan, for instance, only became possible after the country switched from domestic timber to south-east Asian imports after the 1960s. Indeed capitalism’s ‘commonwealth’ relies on this continual back and forth between the primitive accumulation of potential resources held in common and formal capitalist production (Hardt and Negri 2009). Thus even when the commons may seem to offer hope for future ways of life, they are also often tracking shifting capital flows by lying in patches of ruin or land left fallow.

Since the commons are not the obverse of capital or the market, it follows that neither are the commons necessarily opposed to private property. Gibson-Graham et al (2013) schematise three ways of commoning. The first is commoning enclosed resources. This moves narrow access to wide, and expands the use and benefit – as well as responsibilities of care – from owner to a wider community. The second is maintaining existing commons. The third is bringing resources that are not yet managed (or may not yet exist) from open, unregulated access into some form of commons. The key here is that all three of these ways of commoning can take place regardless of property ownership: commons can be found on state, private collective, private individual or open access property. Indeed, work on urban green commons shows that ownership of land is not a determining factor in delivering benefit; rather, the collective right to manage land is key (Colding et al 2013). Most commons therefore subsist as hybrid forms of individual, state or market property claims; more a dialectic of enclosure-commons than a pure oppositional form (Jeffrey et al 2012). Moreover, as commons can precipitate new forms of enclosure, or contain their own forms of injustice, inequality and exclusion (Jeffrey et al 2012). There are parallels here to the emergence of new forms of hybrid urban space produced by neoliberalisation: Turner (2016) argues that ways of commoning are necessarily anti or pro-capitalist, and that new forms of common property regimes may not only resist but also support territorialisation programmes of state and capital. Attention therefore falls not on legal abstracts, such as private vs. public ownership, but on to the practices and social processes of commoning: *cui bono*?

There remains a certain degree of anthropocentrism in both institutional accounts of the commons and in recent turns towards Hardt and Negri's commons ethos. Both tend to see nonhumans as resources to be nurtured, rather than as part of lived entanglements in which more-than-human life also has a stake to claim. By contrast, Bresnihan's (2016) work on lobster fishing in Ireland demonstrates that the commons is not reducible to social rules or institutions, but about situated, less-than-exact



relations and knowledges amid the thick ecologies of lobster and fishermen. The world Bresnihan describes is not inhabited by scarce resources, but by subjects caught in webs beyond their ken and governed by a messy give-and-take. Similarly, Tsing sees the commons as a gathering of lifeways that become more than sum of their parts and offer “fugitive moments of entanglement amid institutionalised alienation” (2015:258). Tsing’s commons, unlike institutional commons, offer no blueprint, no ideal type. Rather than redemption, Tsing’s version of the commons is about recuperating some hope for collaborative, multi-species survival amid the trouble and ruins of the present. Commons emerge from hard graft amid situated histories, so cannot simply be scaled up or replicated without re-drawing the relations that constituted them in the first place. For Tsing the racial-extractive logic of the plantation – calculable units that are scaleable, multipliable, repeatable – is historically intertwined with the logic of enclosure and associated environmental and social harm. The commons, by contrast, she writes, “move in law’s interstices ... catalysed by infraction, infection, inattention – and poaching” (2015:255). Following Tsing, this paper aims to situate urban gardening commons in all their contested, contradictory specificity, rather than to provide a model for understanding community gardens and their potential. For the commons loses vitality when abstracted, translated and replicated elsewhere.

### Researching Lisbon’s gardens

Rather than offer a synoptic history this article weaves a narrative around six emblematic gardens spread across the Lisbon metropolitan area. The sites were selected in conversation with researcher-activists António Brito Guterres and Filipe Matos to represent the diversity of type, location, tenure and ethnicity in urban community gardening in Lisbon. Table 1 provides an overview.

Location	Garden	Access & Use	Care & Benefit	Responsibility	Property
1.Telheiras	Medium-sized neighbourhood garden in middle class district	Listed gardeners only for hobby gardening (middle-to-upper middle class residents)	Allocated gardeners only	Assumed by gardeners with municipal regulation	Municipal land

2. Horta do Monte	Small plot in city centre, occupied by young gardeners	Shared by community and open to all (but mostly educated youth)	Assumed by gardeners, benefit distributed widely	Assumed by gardeners	Illegal occupation of municipal land
3. Chelas	Large area of scattered plots between lower-class public housing estates	Shared by community (mix of white Portuguese, African and Indian immigrants)	Assumed by gardeners	Assumed by gardeners, some municipal improvement schemes	Regularized municipal land
4. Santa Filomena	Large area on or adjacent to shanty town awaiting clearance	Tightly shared by local community (Portuguese-speaking African immigrants)	Assumed by local community	Assumed by gardeners	Private land
5. Casal da Mira	Large valley garden near new estate of rehoused slum dwellers	Shared by local community (Portuguese-speaking African immigrants)	Assumed by local community	Assumed by gardeners	Unregularized occupation of municipal land
6. Adroana	Small gardens adjacent to new public estate of rehoused slum dwellers	Shared by local community (Portuguese-speaking African immigrants and white Portuguese residents)	Allocated gardeners only	Assumed by gardeners with municipal regulation	Municipal land, with some unregularized occupation nearby

Table 1: Six community gardens in Lisbon

We visited these gardens in 2013 and 2015. An initial, unstructured visit was made to each site in summer 2013 when we talked to different gardeners, walked around their gardens and spoke to neighbourhood representatives. This allowed us to see gardeners interacting with the species, technologies and traditions they nurture on an everyday basis as well as differences between sites. Our approach drew on our previous research into informal settlements and rehousing in Lisbon (Ascensão 2015a; 2016) and domestic gardening (Ginn 2014; 2016), in which we used the method of asking respondents to ‘show me your shack’, or ‘show me your garden’. The initial visits were complemented with five recorded interviews and many more informal conversations in summer and autumn 2015. The gap between the two visits allowed us to see how these gardens adapted over time. In what follows we situate these sites in three wider narratives about the changing form and politics of urban green commons. We are less interested in the internal processes governing these commons, and more in the broader historical-geographical dynamics of how the urban gardening commons diverge. These three narratives are not strictly in chronological order, nor neatly organised by garden. Rather, they aim to capture the interplay of processes in different

forms of commons. We begin by outlining the bottom-up emergence of gardening commons across greater Lisbon.

### **Class, subaltern urbanism and the emergence of autonomous gardening commons**

Lisbon's twentieth-century urban growth broadly followed the tenets of French *urbanisme*, with the city expanding along large radial avenues (Oliveira and Pinho 2008; Camarinhas 2011). Planners did set aside some space for urban gardens; new 1950s and 60s modernist housing estates, such as those at Alvalade or Olivais, featured vegetable plots. Regardless of planners, thousands of other ad hoc plots near residential buildings, in urban voids, or occupying parts of *terrenos baldios* (brownfield sites) were scattered across the metropolitan area – altogether, these dwarfed in size the official horticultural spaces. In this section we review three different processes involved in establishing these gardens. These are all autonomous commons, in that they are appropriations of land (either public or private) and involved self-organising groups of residents managing access and distribution of benefit.

Emblematic of the labour of the working and unemployed poor in making the city from the soil up are the gardens at Chelas, an area of low-income public housing. Prior to urbanisation, Chelas was an agricultural valley with several estates and a few groups of houses, with the area towards the river occupied by warehouses trading in metal, ceramics and printing. Rural migrants to Lisbon occupying these new estates took to planting vegetable gardens in the surrounding areas. Figure 1 illustrates one of the many gardens in Chelas: a steep-sided valley beneath the overpass of the metro line between the Olaias and Bela Vista stations. Though the demographics have shifted, from white Portuguese working class, to Portuguese-speaking African, to south Asian migrants, the different populations continue to appropriate these urban remainders to grow their vegetables (Bastos 1991; Barreto 2015).

Sr. Manuel, for instance, has been gardening in Chelas for more than thirty years. His plot has gradually grown to over 200m<sup>2</sup>, as he has accumulated land left fallow when

other plot-holders moved on. A skilled gardener, each year Sr. Manuel harvests some 600kg of potatoes, 200kg of onions, as well as smaller amounts of tomatoes, cabbage, lettuce, beans. He has incorporated aspects of permaculture into his gardening practice: he compared the sizes of two cabbages, one grown during the fourth waning and one in the crescent phase of the moon. He is nonetheless adamant that chemical fertiliser is necessary to obtain this level of cropping (an issue to which we return later). The Chelas gardens are densely cropped and supplement strained domestic economies, given many people are retired with minimum pensions of €200–300 per month. They exemplify makeshift urbanism (e.g. Vasudevan 2015). They are untidy and ramshackle. Gardeners make use of reclaimed timber, brick or polythene, with plastic barrels and duct-taped hosepipes for irrigation systems. These gardens are on hard-to-develop public land, the interstitial spaces of transport infrastructure. They have historically been tacitly accepted by the municipal authorities – though as subsequent sections explore, the situation is changing.



Figure 1. Gardens in Chelas.

A second, similar, form of makeshift gardening commons also emerged in Lisbon. From the mid-1960s, the family-run agricultural enterprises which surrounded Lisbon began to struggle to compete with larger companies and the land fell into disuse (Rodrigues 1989). Rural migrants unable to access housing in the city settled here, usually without planning permission or legal tenure (the dictatorship was ideologically unwilling to implement sufficient public housing provision and financially unable to address the housing crisis because of the colonial war effort). These settlements, an expression of

informal subaltern urbanism, were called *clandestinos*. Residents depended on manual casual employment, typically construction or agricultural labour (Pinto 2009).

Vegetable gardening and small livestock husbandry were key means of subsistence or income supplement and an integral part of the rural migrant, working class peri-urban way of life (this pattern is replicated in many Southern European cities; see Domene and Sauri 2007 on Barcelona).

The poorer of these illegal settlements underwent a second period of expansion after the Portuguese revolution in 1974. Migrants from Portuguese-speaking former colonies priced out of the housing market, like the rural Portuguese migrants before them, built shacks in the still vacant plots at each site. Over time the migrants, drawing on their construction industry skills, improved these houses until they consolidated into dense shanty towns, tapping into the city's water and electricity infrastructures. The new residents, particularly those of Cape Verdeans and Bissau Guinean background, cultivated gardens on site or nearby. These gardens are a link to the past and to homeland for many of the gardeners and an expression of culture. They also give unemployed and retired residents "something to do," as one gardener told us. The gardens' most important function, however, is a space to provide food – compensation in the face of economic hardship. The gardeners cultivate different varieties of cabbage, fava beans, as well as sugar cane to make grogue, or rum. Since Cape Verdeans arrived in Portugal in the aftermath of independence in 1975, they have experimented with different varieties of sugar cane, adapted to the specific micro-climates of their particular gardens. Regular Saturday morning gatherings at one garden involve eating cachupa (a traditional bean-based dish) and drinking rum (Cabannes and Raposo 2012). As well as gardens established by Portuguese rural-urban migrants, therefore, many of these spaces were historically established by post-colonial migrants, with subtly different functions and spatial forms. If the working-class gardens at Chelas have generally remained stable, these postcolonial gardening commons have been subjected to more sustained acts of discipline and erasure – as we discuss in subsequent sections.

A third more recent process has influenced Lisbon's hortas. The financial crash of 2008 precipitated a sovereign debt crisis in Portugal, leading to a financial bailout from the IMF, the European Commission and the European Central Bank in 2011. One of the conditions of the bailout was the implementation of deep austerity measures. Unemployment country-wide jumped to 14 per cent in 2011, peaking at 17.5 per cent in 2013 (INE 2015). In response to the crisis, urban gardens cropped up in the interstices of urban fabric: along railway lines, in abandoned lots and under viaducts.

In parallel, young, highly educated but precariously employed people started to develop gardening in interstitial city spaces. In 2008, a self-organising network of people appropriated a small patch of land at the edge of one of Lisbon's historical districts, Graça. Digging terraces, raising beds and planting vegetable crops, the group established the Horta do Monte. Many of these activists were loosely connected to the Occupy movement and more formally associated with the Transition Towns movement and Permaculture networks.<sup>4</sup> Their motivations blended concern over industrial agriculture, food miles, food security and sustainability. They aimed to deliver free food to those most in need. This garden exemplifies the recent, creative appropriation of urban interstices seen in many European cities: organically planned, collectively implemented, and carried forward with hard graft into a precarious future (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015, Mayer 2013). These efforts form a new commons and new forms of sociality and ecology. Since urban gardens provide sustenance and social support, governments can allow or even encourage them to flourish during times of crisis. As we explore in the next section, in this case the Horta do Monte ran up against regressive state policies regarding urban development.

### **Erasure and violence in the gardening commons**

From long-standing gardens in appropriated state land beside public housing, to postcolonial migrants establishing gardening spaces and shanty towns, to the more recent expansion of micro-gardening spaces associated gardening as resistance – this

range of informal gardening commons has precipitated various state reactions. In this section we outline two of the most direct and violent: the erasure of the Horte do Monte, and the long-running removal of Lisbon's shanty settlements and their gardens. Both of these are associated with property-led urban development: as land values change, sites occupied by gardening commons become more lucrative. These cases are examples of the 'solving' of grey spaces by turning tacitly accepted, unregularised use of land into something illegal, dangerous, unacceptable and thus erasable (Yitfcahel 2009).

Early one morning in June 2013, the Council arrived at the Horte do Monte, cleared the plants, removed fences and razed the garden with bulldozers (Figure 2). The Council allowed no space for negotiation and refused to recognize the collective energy of the garden activists in the Horta do Monte (see Sousa 2014:58-9;79). This should not be seen as a blanket rejection by the authorities of bottom-up claims to the city articulated through gardening. It was rather due to both the radical claims of the gardeners and the prominence of the site – perched on the hillside, highly visible to all. Publicly, the council justified their actions as necessary to ensure an equitable distribution – they claimed that people 'squatting' the land were depriving others of access (Boaventura 2013). While this might be seen as an example of the state being unwilling to cede to the populous questions of access and alienation to land, the underlying reason was that this claim to space and to ecology did not fit with the mayor's tourist-led strategy. The garden borders Mouraria-Intendente, the city's historic migrant reception district (Fonseca and McGarrigle 2013). This area is currently undergoing a state-led urban regeneration scheme, including refurbishing historic buildings for council offices, arts centres, new public squares and a major new park (Malheiros et al 2013; Tulumello 2015). The garden has since been reinstated but plots are now allocated and very strict rules set by the city council. This has included sheds and fences to enforce a specific aesthetic – tidy, ordered, functional. The new, council-run garden fits within a broader programme of urban regeneration. We see here the over-writing of a recently-made commons: the state changes the management regime

(from bottom-up collective to top-down rule-bound), rules of access (from managed by the community to managed by state gatekeepers) and distribution of benefit (from a network centred on the Horte do Monte, to narrower economic benefits associated with aesthetic urban nature, gentrification and tourism).



Figure 2. The Horta do Monte garden before clearance in 2013 (left); clearing the gardens (middle) and the site after clearance (right).

A much-longer running process has played out in Lisbon's postcolonial shanty settlements. The case of Santa Filomena is just one recent example in a long history of government violence against slum dwellers in Lisbon. Shanty settlements were initially developed by white Portuguese rural migrants from the 1960s onwards and, later, by black postcolonial migrants from Portuguese-speaking African countries, from 1970s onwards. Many gradually expanded to a size where the state was unable or unwilling to raze it because of financial constraints in re-housing residents. To address this problem, in 1993 the central government enacted a Special Relhousing Program (known as PER, *Plano Especial de Realojamento*). In a fragmented process spanning over 30 years, the state has cleared nearly all Lisbon's shanty settlements and rehoused their residents, often in segregated public housing estates (Cachado 2013). In particular, whenever land was needed for infrastructure or middle-class residential development, the municipality demolished settlements and relocated residents elsewhere.

Santa Filomena was surveyed in 1993 as part of the PER, with a view to clearance and rehousing of its population (then around 2,000). The Amadora city council was however unable to implement the programme because of financial constraints. A



situation of stasis with the neighbourhood 'pending demolition' persisted for two decades. During that period, people moved in and out, but those who moved in after 1993 were not eligible for rehousing. In 2012, the city council estimated there were only 166 households still living in Santa Filomena eligible for resettlement. There were 172 households not eligible for relocation under the program (Carmo 2013). These non-eligible households were served eviction notices and their homes summarily demolished in 2013 – a clear case of domicile (Porteous and Smith 2001).<sup>5</sup> As investment capital flows in, so too do the bulldozers. PER-eligible households remained, but the financial crisis put a halt to much of previously-planned housing expenditure. The residents' preferred solution – in situ rehousing in a dedicated public estate – was also in this case impossible, as the private land owner (a real estate developer with close ties to the Amadora mayor) wanted to develop the site by expanding the nearby Urbanização Casal de Vila Chã private development. The dynamic here is an interplay between historic acts of commoning – the emergence of informal settlement and gardening – and punitive acts of enclosure, set against the backdrop of sustained state acts of disciplining migrant communities.



Figure 3: Santa Filomena shanty town: gardening in the ruins of demolished homes, 2015.

At the time of writing, Santa Filomena presented an apocalyptic scene, with a few remaining shanties sitting amid destroyed homes. The soil was full of rubble after the demolitions, but remaining residents along with some evictees cleared the site and began to garden amid the ruins (Figure 3). One young man still living on the site

planted beans, corn and potatoes. We counted ten gardens of around 40m<sup>2</sup> each to the west of the settlement and 15 to the east, as well as several larger ones to the North, in the area where a future gated community will be built. There were also around 15 garden plots where once stood houses. These gardening commons, once a large-scale poaching of private land and a key part of community subsistence, have been largely erased, made victim to a development project, itself stalled in the face of financial collapse. The gardening commons here is a remnant. They subsist at the violent end-game of Lisbon's postcolonial urban politics as highly provisional, improvised attempts to sustain precarious lives. This is where the power of gardening to offer hope stretches thin. The struggle against dispossession and eviction is all but over here. All that is left is gardening as consolation amid the ruins of a shattered community and shattered homes.



Figure 4: Casal da Mira: water drainage platforms (left), a gardener watering his vegetables (middle), and motorway flyover (right).

Of course, the city does not stay still; erasure is never permanent. Gardening commons have resurged in the last 10 years in a valley beside the Casal da Mira public housing estate. The estate's 2,500 inhabitants, the majority of Cape Verdean descent, were rehoused from the distant shanty town of Azinhaga dos Besouros, as well as some from Santa Filomena, in the mid-2000s as part of the PER programme. The process was similarly contentious, as it destroyed labour and family networks. Drawing on traditional Cape Verdean techniques of agriculture suited to hilly slopes with poor soils, some residents appropriated an interstitial space created by flyovers connecting the Inner and the Outer Regional Roads. They use the terraces left by the roads department to capture water as it flows down the valley for irrigation, cultivate fava

beans, sugar cane and other crops. The act of commoning here is like poaching by the cunning and make-do bootlegger: repurposing highway infrastructure and seizing a dead zone (Doron 2000). We can see, then, how the commons always relates to enclosure (Blomley 2008; van Holstein 2016). In Casal da Mira the resurgence of an autonomous gardening commons is a response to a previous, violent, enclosure: the demolition of a shanty for property development.

### **Negotiating state-led and autonomous commons**

The state does not always meet the autonomous, bottom-up commons with processes of violent erasure, but also with more subtle forms of negotiation and enclosure. In Lisbon, the city council has begun to implement its own kind of top-down gardening commons in highly directed, regulated spaces. These gardens do not however neatly represent entrepreneurial, neoliberal urbanism (see Ernwein 2017); they are also bound up with longer-running ideas of citizenship, responsibility, and ecology.

The middle-class district of Telheiras features one of the Council's showpiece gardens. Although residents had been proposing plans for a garden for many years, the *Parque Hortícola de Telheiras* was implemented in executive fashion by the Lisbon City Council in 2012. Soil was trucked in from a golf course and the garden was laid out with twenty-two 80m<sup>2</sup> plots. A competition to allocate these plots attracted over 1,000 entrants. Some gardeners attend almost every day, while those with smaller parcels typically spend four to six hours per week gardening. As one gardener put it: "I feel good to come here. My back doesn't like it, but psychologically it's good. Out in the open air... I've met new people... There's a lot of sharing, though I don't know everyone here." While the gardeners can exercise the right to exclude outsiders, their management is constrained by externally set rules: gardening is for recreation (selling produce is forbidden); only organic agriculture is allowed (the city council gave training sessions on seeds, companion planting, pest control and composting); plastics are banned. A consultant visits to check gardeners adhere to these regulations. The garden is sponsored by Vitacress, a multinational vegetable distributor. Participation in the

gardening commons here is conditional, interpolated through bureaucratic hoops and requiring compliance with the rules of the game.



Figure 5: Residents tend their crops (left); view of gardens with private sponsorship (right).

In order to understand why this garden was established, we need to take a step back and understand the story behind the municipality's current policy. In the 1960s the influential landscape architect Gonalo Ribeiro-Telles (born 1922) advocated that planners conserve urban nature more overtly, and that they systematically enable urban gardening inside residential estates. "Green spaces in the city," he wrote, "must not be circumscribed to the residual areas left vacant by buildings, roads and car parks. On the contrary, they should constitute full systems and structures with territorial and cultural expression ... Nature's presence is indispensable to the quality of the urban environment, to the city's beauty and to the recreation, health and wellbeing of the population' (CML 1992:8). Telles was the founder of a pro-monarchy political party (Partido Popular Monárquico), so his critics tended to reduce Telles' conservationist impulses to his conservative politics, even though his ecological vision stretched beyond his politics. His plan centred on the goal of connecting pre-existing green areas across the metropolitan area through a network of ecological corridors (*continuum naturales*), the largest of which would connect the city to the Monsanto urban forest (CML 1992:30; Telles et al 1997:19).



While derided by planners at the time, three decades later Telles' ideas found favour in the new Green Plan for Lisbon, formally adopted in 2006 (Telles et al 1997, initially sketched in CML 1992). As one landscape architect told us, "he used to go on about urban gardens and everyone said, 'This man's crazy!' but now he's not crazy anymore." Telles' original plans advocated for the full implementation of the tenets of continuum naturales, which superseded the idea that discrete 'urban lungs' were ecologically sufficient. However, with urban expansion through the 1990s and early 2000s, much of the area allocated for the corridors became criss-crossed with major roads, industrial or commercial zones and residential developments. A less ambitious version of Telles' plan, along with a patchwork of smaller parks and cycle-ways, were initiated fifteen years ago and are now nearly complete (Figure 6). The rise of green infrastructure in the city from the 1990s onwards has been highly visible, but has paid little more than lip service to biodiversity and ecological aims advanced in Telles' plan. Continuum naturales became a patchwork of interrupted corridors. Implementation of the plan has been hampered by a centralist, top-down political culture, poorly integrated management and a lack of public trust (Schilling 2010). Lisbon's current Green Plan is an early example of a now-popular paradigm in urban planning: managing the urban green for amenity, wellbeing and service provision as opposed to multispecies flourishing (Metzger 2016).

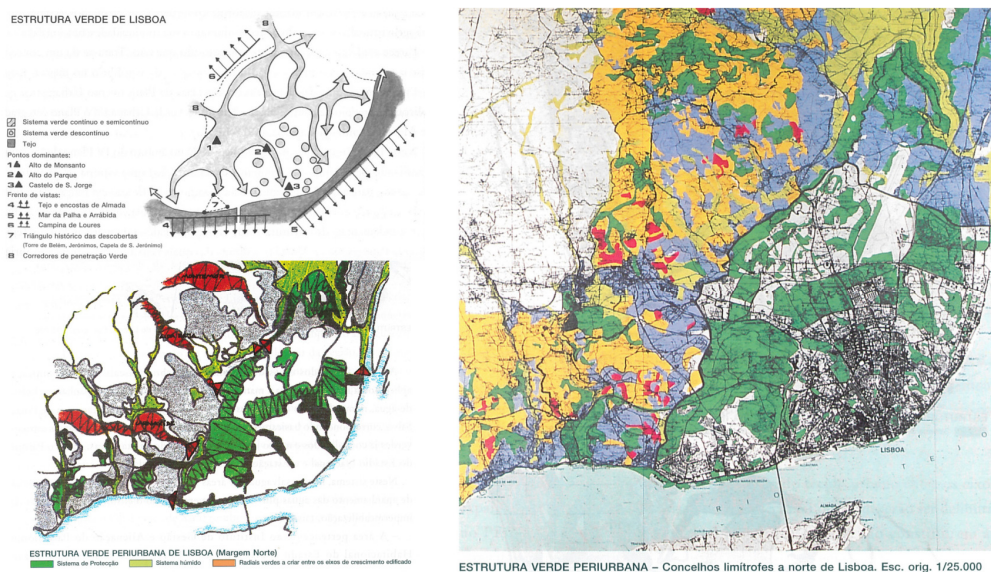


Figure 6. Early sketches of ecological corridors in greater Lisbon (left); a more detailed plan (right).  
Source: Telles 1997.

As part of the current Green Plan, the Lisbon City Council has implemented a network of urban allotment gardens (*Parques Hortícolas*) – one of these is Telheiras. The Telheiras gardens appear frequently as a best practice model in the media and in policy reports. From a critical perspective, however, the gardens are a token for political marketing and the top-down creation of an environmentally-friendly urban citizen. As one gardener told us, “This is all about an image for the city council to exploit, it is a highly visible project of the councilman, and they mostly care that it looks productive and that it looks nice.” Organised garden projects, as outlined in the introduction, can often promote ecological citizenship within the terms set by the state, creating neoliberal subjects (Pudup 2008; Barron 2016). We might note the use of an individual-based *competition* to allocate the plots, as opposed to allocation based on social need or collective agreement. While the Council’s publicity foregrounds an appearance of earthy permanence, the gardens are temporary. Each resident has an annual contract, making long-term plans unviable and pitching bureaucratic time against the longer-run temporalities of soil, plants and growth. The Telheiras garden, moreover, is positioned on a patch of public land zoned as ‘residential development awaiting future construction’. This means that the garden’s future is uncertain. If land values increase sufficiently, there is no promise that the Council will not develop or sell the land out from under the gardeners. This site of urban agriculture enters into longer-term development strategies as a means to “keep vacant sites warm while development capital is cool” (Tonkiss 2013:318).

Telheiras is an example, then, of a top-down commons used to “provoke new styles of citizen-led enclosure” (Jeffrey et al 2012:1258). However, even if temporary and circumscribed, gardeners have staked a claim founded on use value: the land’s capacity to feed and nourish, rather than its exchange value for property developers. Poaching and infraction of the rules also occurs, as many gardeners have informally divided their already small plots to give access to friends and family. One gardener told us, “There are some common areas where there are companion species to call bees,

like thyme, rosemary. Not everyone keeps this common space free, and it's a shame they don't. They encroach on it with their plants, it's not good." This is a reminder that such gardens are not harmonious spaces, but full of their own micro-dynamics of commoning/enclosure. Moreover, abstract municipal rules can be internalised by commoners. As one gardener told us: "I agree with the rules as it's considered a recreational park, for residents." Having a simple rule banning pesticides meant collective organic gardening; the ban on trees means no shading; banning economic activity also means that there is no "economic pressure to sub-let plots," as another gardener put it. Held to a standard of an insurgent, radical, self-organising commons the gardens at Telheiras fall short. But held to this impossible standard, all gardens would fall short. These gardeners cohere around a set of practices to create new eco-social networks that would not otherwise have existed. Some commitment to beneficial socio-ecological outcomes exists here, even as they re-articulate notions of civic responsibility, liberal citizenship and middle-class lifestyle gardening. Despite the deadening hand of the state – the 'poison' to refrain Stengers point from the introduction – being visible in its veins, this is a commons worth defending, rather than held to an impossible standard.

As well as creating new horticultural parks, Lisbon's Green Plan gives impetus to disciplining existing gardening commons. We return to the gardens of Chelas where, driven by an aesthetic vision of the 'right kind of nature', the council has tried to 'regularise' the gardens. The City employed landscape architects to formalise and beautify plots, removing makeshift sheds, fences and plastics (Figure 1 right; see also Mata 2014:3; Domene and Saurí 2007; Cabannes and Raposo 2012). Unlike at the showpiece Telheiras gardens, the soil – as one gardener put it – "was like rock." Chelas is now home to the largest park in the Urban Allotment Gardens Network, with 220 plots (Mata 2014; Sousa-Matos 2015). But the informal, 'unregularised' gardens between the public housing estates – which are generally larger – remain more important for the food security of many residents than the highly regulated municipal park. Sr Manuel, who we quoted in an earlier section, was allocated one of these plots,

but quickly gave it up as “the area [of the Horticultural Park plots] is too small for people in need”. He drew a clear distinction between the kind of hobby gardening envisioned by the council, and subsistence agriculture: “One thing is for you to be employed and wanting to plant a lettuce or a tomato for fun, a different thing is you’re retired and need to get food from your garden ... Plus they have all these prejudices: they don’t want chemicals, they don’t want this, they don’t want that. You can’t grow in quantity like that.” We can see here how subaltern urbanism, the claims and informal architectures of the poor, meet the frontiers of urban greening and development. One form of commons (implemented following a model; run according to the rules of the bureaucracy) ascends over another form of commons (historically embedded; bottom-up). The state’s tacit acceptance of informal claims to the city is only every provisional. While gardening commons can be subject to state violence and erasure – as the case of the Santa Filomena slum clearance discussed in the previous section – they can also be “laundered”, tamed or pacified, made to fit a vision of appropriate nature and gardening for lifestyle, not life (Yitfachel 2009).

Subtly different laundering processes are at work in a housing estate, Adroana, built to rehouse inhabitants of the former shanty towns Marianas and Fim do Mundo (End of the World) in the Cascais municipality. As was common in the PER scheme, this much-contested new estate was segregated from surrounding houses, far from the shanty town being demolished, far from resident’s existing employment and far from good transport and commercial links (Ascensão 2015b). The original site of the Marianas shanty is now prime real estate. The Cascais City Council has attempted to improve the new neighbourhood by providing a basketball court/futsal pitch, small horticultural park and garden workshops. These workshops, named *Mãos à Horta* (a pun on getting one’s hands dirty and the Portuguese word for vegetable garden, *horta*) aimed to teach residents what kind of seeds they should plant, including which species from their countries of origin (Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau) would be suitable for the sandy soil. ‘Eco-creative cooking classes’, were supposed to teach residents how to cook these vegetables. Classes were taken by 60 people, including many single men,



who form a significant part of the population of many estates where former slum dwellers were rehoused. Residents then applied for one of the new garden plots laid out by the council. However, there are only 28 plots of 30m<sup>2</sup> (Figure 7), insufficient to satisfy the considerable demand. As the gardeners of Adroana told us, there is nonetheless a mutual support network, with people giving some of the food they grow to their neighbours, as well as sharing seeds, advice and equipment. Others helped look after their neighbours' tomatoes and lettuces. Nonetheless, unlike at the middle-class gardens of Telheiras, here "no one has sub-divided their plots." These plots are too small to subdivide since the gardeners of Adroana rely on their produce for subsistence. As a temporary solution, some unemployed residents established plots beyond the official park, although the soil is rockier and much less fertile; another example of the resurgence of the autonomous commons in response to state-led enclosure. These plots are on municipal land and have apparently been tolerated, although the residents do not know for how long this will continue.



Figure 7: Adroana estate garden plots in 2013 (top left); inside the perimeter in 2015, this gardener grows corn, okra and other vegetables (top and bottom right); plots outside the perimeter (bottom left).

The gardening initiative at Adroana stems directly from the longstanding state goal to govern and manage these urban populations as 'others' (Fikes 2009): as 'accepted

others' in the most benign cases (to be guided, taught and managed), or 'tolerated others' in the less benign cases (such as those gardeners who have appropriated nearby land) to be segregated and contained for the time being. It speaks to graduated sovereignty, the division of the population into subjects constituted through a range of punitive, caring and managerial technologies (Ong 2006; on Portugal see Cabannes and Raposo 2013; Luiz and Jorge 2012). Although the cooking and gardening programmes both had a nod to cultural specificity, they were also an attempt to force residents into the same hobbyist and lifestyle mode of gardening as that seen in Telheiras – a paternalist attempt to make their gardening practices *appropriate*. The small scale, micro-management and top-down approach shows that nature in this case becomes integrated into the broader historical project of governing the poor, black postcolonial migrants who started to settle in Lisbon from the 1970s onwards. The imposition of a state-circumscribed form of gardening commons is, in this case, a way of reproducing a form of racial nature (Heynen 2016; Safransky 2014).

## **Conclusion**

Urban community gardening is often a quest for what Tonkiss (2013:312) calls "durability through the temporary." The seasonal rhythms of gardening can be precarious, but over time repeated patterns of life and labour may etch themselves into the land. Gardening of course provides recreation, cultural continuity, subsistence and the kernels for claiming the city. But gardening is not reducible to these instrumental functions. Gardens do not simply appear in the interstices of urban fabric, nor do they suddenly sprout from ground exposed as capital drains away to more fertile markets. Unlike many other forms of urban commons, community gardening coheres around a shared love of plants. A garden is a common ecology-in-the-making that requires time, soil, sun and one's own labour to coax life into being: a practical experiment with "the possibility of a collective regime of thinking and action" (Stengers 2015:138). Hope resides in the mundane spirit of gardening; not striving for guarantees or idyllic solutions, but digging in the dirt and ruin of the present. This is not, we stress, a singular, common hope, but one that multiplies and diverges

according to the particular blend of poison or cure discernible in any particular gardening commons.

There are two broad directions this divergence takes in Lisbon's urban gardening commons. The first is the emergence of autonomous, bottom-up commons. The question of property – legal rights to the land – is less important here than historical precedent. The compromise between poor urbanites and the state concerning unregulated land has eroded slowly in Lisbon, but opportunities for collective organisation around shared interest and benefit persist and continue to emerge. In Lisbon, new gardens have been made, be they overt claims of a right to the city, to temporary gardens amid the ruins of displaced community. Urban community gardening also continues in long-established plots, compensating the economic hardship of the urban poor. Further from the centre, opportunities for claiming space have been more available, with productive valleys collectively organised by poor Cape Verdean and Bissau Guinean residents. For some postcolonial migrants, the urban garden is a means of expressing and performing cultural identity, while simultaneously experimenting with practices of belonging in Lisbon. The gardening commons here is not pre-scripted, but emerges through “unstable and malleable social relation[s] between a particular self-defined social group” cohering around the idea that their piece of land be treated as off limits to “logic of market exchange and market valuations” – at least for a while (Harvey 2012:73). The hope born in these gardens is not that this commons will save the city or heal deep social, economic and racial injustice. The hope offered here might be simply one of putting a few more beans in the pot, but we should think no less of the gardens for that.

The second direction is the erasure or laundering of existing gardening commons by the managerial hand of the state. In Lisbon this is worked out according to the middling implementation of a more ambitious original Green Plan. Urban development has created a pleasant green network where tourists ride segways past the Horta do Monte, the increasingly insolvent middle classes ride bicycles, rent rooms and sip

coffee, while the tolerated working class can garden provided they stick to the script of sanitised nature. Beat-up old blue barrels full of scummy rain water and insect larvae – as vital as they might be for some – do not fit this aesthetic vision of nature. This Green Plan has dovetailed with state resettlement of shanty towns, and the overt domicile and paternalist interventions disciplining black migrants and attempting to impose a particular, racialized, vision of urban nature. While the degree of ‘poison’ differs – from violent erasure to the inculcation of a green liberal citizenship – the direction of travel is similar. The municipalities of the Lisbon metropolitan area seek either to overwrite existing gardens or to create their own form of publicly-directed commons in the name of a generic – but classed and racialized – public good.

The temptation for the critic is to find compare these top-down, state-led gardening commons to the autonomy of bottom-up commons and find them wanting (since they are stained by the poisons of neoliberal, entrepreneurial individualism and the deadening hand of state paternalism). To do so would, however, require an appeal to “something in common”, something stronger and purer that lay behind these particular crystallisations of a commons (Stengers 2005:189). In this article we have emphasised the commons not as an ideal, but as a collection of historically embedded lifeways that assemble along two divergent, but not entirely separate, pathways. This divergence is not to be understood as difference from an ideal type, or from an abstract category. As Stengers writes, trust cannot be placed in any “spontaneous capacity for resistance” coalescing around “an idyllic vision of ... commoners united by and around a common” (2015:98). Rather than a singular commons, Stengers proposes that we must learn “the manner of making divergences exist” (2015:141). Honouring the way these divergences come to exist – and to persist through time – enables us to respect what makes the particular cases matter. It also enables us to see that commitment to the commons need not imply a pre-constituted common world. This is a question, write Blaser and de la Cadena, of “learning to refuse the colonising reduction to a shared category” (2017:192). This argument does not imply a preference for an anything-goes, pluralistic flourishing of any and all types of

commons. Divergent pathways driven by different manners of commoning can go their own ways, or they can conflict in particular spaces, as one with stronger institutional backing overwrites another. This implies that urban gardening commons are a counterpoint not only to enclosure, but also to each other. They forge worlds-in-common which diverge. Gardening, then, appears less as a universal pre-constituted practice and more as a virtual more-than-human relation that is materialised in divergent ways. In short, the urban gardening commons do not have a 'common' in common.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Rather than play a game of ‘hunt the neoliberalism’ we let the term subsist as a shadowy variable. While acknowledging the nuance and scope of work on neoliberalisation, wider academic currents are increasingly casting doubt on the way neoliberal critique has assumed “hegemonic dimensions in the progressive geographical literature” (Parnell and Robinson 2012:593).

<sup>2</sup> One meta-analysis found that 60% of academic studies were of gardens in USA, and 92% in the USA, UK, Canada or Australia (Guitart et al 2012).

<sup>3</sup> In Southern Europe, urban neoliberalisation has been associated with changes in city-state relations, as city leaders gain more autonomy when the central state loosens its grasp. Moreover, neoliberalism has been refracted through stronger commitments to liberalism as well as a vocal Left (Le Gales 2016; Pinson 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Due to relatively cheap land and the range of existing autonomous commons, permaculture has a large following in Lisbon, drawing in young migrants from Germany and France.

<sup>5</sup> Activist housing collective Habita65 drew attention to the case; the national media published several pieces; MPs from the Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc) and the Portuguese Communist Party visited the site. None of these stopped the demolition.